

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE INTO CULTURAL AWARENESS AND AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

Ms. Otero's bachelor's thesis researched the issue of cultural awareness. Her advisor (and coauthor of the present article) recommended implementing the task-based approach as put forward by Willis (1998), which provoked an additional theoretical question over the use of a functional approach textbook within a TBL learning cycle.

This contribution presents the results from an introductory college class that carried out a project from a standard textbook lesson on health problems, which was expanded into a project on their own health issues. Dramatizations of their own scripting served as the tools through which the students represented their diverse world views on health. The recommendations and treatments they prescribed crystallize their critical thinking within the specific situations.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, task based approach, foreign language education

Introduction

A bachelor's thesis became the forum within which the issue of cultural awareness was researched and, moreover, served as the framework for putting the issue of authenticity under the microscope.

Main Text

The bachelor's thesis by one of authors of this article, Otero Sosa, researched the issue of cultural awareness, because she has always been interested in how persons from different cultures view those concepts that the state curriculum specifies concerning cultural issues. Her concerns include how the task-based approach can aid in breaking through those barriers derived from the stereotypes students bring to the classroom derivative of their diverse cultures. The broader concern is about how learning materials bring up cultural aspects and how students can learn and convey meaning through them. This question is about how language learning materials form part of the curriculum to promote intercultural awareness.

When she approached the other author of this article with the request to be thesis advisor, he recommended implementing the task-based approach as put forward by Willis (1998), partly to be consequent with his passion for Socioconstructivism, but also with the aim of putting to the test certain principles from the Whole Language movement which postulate that the language to be learned must belong to and empower the student. Thus, the messages they expressed in the experimental class would be enveloped in their cultures.

When the time came to consider how to carry out my experimental intervention, the practical issues involved brought us to an additional theoretical question over how Willis's TBL learning cycle can be implemented within a standard introductory course which had been built around a functional approach textbook.

But then, as we progressed in preparing the experiment, yet another issue pressed itself to the centre of our attention. The manner in which the relative amounts of learning achieved

by the two groups was to be compared, made a central concern of how evaluation is carried within the Task-based Approach, insofar as cultural learning may be concerned. In fact, the final chapter of the thesis came to deal with evaluation and its principles — rather than the standard quantitative and qualitative statistical analysis reporting on the raw data collected. Rather than a Positivist model where the progress of a control group is compared against the progress in an experimental group, this investigation used a dialectical model that analyses an educational intervention within a single group.

Moreover, the advantages a discourse analysis approach to research can outweigh the disadvantages any lack of numerical findings could supply. The kind of qualitative data that discourse analysis provides about learning is much richer, deeper and, assuredly, long lasting. This assertion is derived from principles underlying the Socioconstructivist learning theory, the principles having to do with critical learning derived from personalization of the knowledge the student is to internalize. In any field, but especially when learning a language, students construct their own paradigms of its declarative and procedural aspects, as well as the conditions under which these are implemented.

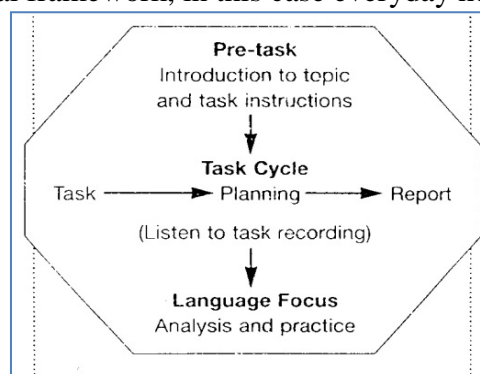
Thus students must be involved in contexts in which appropriate and relevant activities create learning conditions. Students must feel, make connections, and infer meanings so that language becomes meaningful and then a paradigm shift comes implicitly. Students start to understand what the context is about, what is it for, and in which situations it may applied and used. Last but not least, by solving problems and tasks which lead them to negotiation, they can understand cultural aspects, learning which allows them to become tolerant and appreciate other cultures and interact in diverse situations.

Said interaction requires each interlocutor to put forward their own needs and worldviews.

The negotiation of meaning starts when they can discuss and find their own best solution to a given problem.

The Intervention

The interaction of these variables was analysed via an educational intervention adapted from Willis's learning cycle (1998) to one of the typical topics in a general language course written within the Functional framework, in this case everyday health problems.



Willis, Jane. 1998. Task-based learning. *in* Otero S. Alma Daniela and Siders V., T. Nevin. 2013. *Lessons on Song and Culture*.

This task-based sequence is brief and straightforward, but that certainly does not imply it is simple! The thematic warm up necessarily contextualizes the semantic field, so the culture of the target language may be introduced from the very beginning of the lesson. Later, the student comes back to that culture in the closing stage of Report. In between, the teacher gives instructions, and the students plan and carry the task out.

What is unique about this sequence is that the listening comprehension activity and language awareness come after the task has been fulfilled. So, by setting these aside for

afterward, it permits greater attention to the language and culture during implementation of the task.

With the aid of this model, the teacher was able to adapt that standard coursebook activity into a proper task per Willis. This college class carried out a task from the textbook's lesson on health problems, which was expanded into a project on their own health issues. Dramatizations of their own scripting served as the tools through which the students represented their diverse worldviews on health. The recommendations and treatments they prescribed crystallize their critical thinking within the specific situations.

The first step, or Pretask stage, was for the students to mime the coursebook's lexical items on health problems, such as *headache*, *stomachache*, *cough*, and *insomnia*. Then, volunteers wrote on the board health problem words they already knew, and the teacher assisted in writing them correctly.

Many students came to the front of the classroom randomly and they had to mime some health problem words so that their classmates could guess what the word was.

The second step, or While stage, was for the students to guess what the listening activity was about. The instructions were to infer what the context was; the model conversation in the recording was of a secretary and his boss. The students discussed in pairs and, after inferring the context, the recording was played twice again so students could write everything they heard in the conversation. Then the whole class was divided in two large groups; one of them followed the instructions to complete the tasks from the coursebook, the other group was assigned to write up home remedies, which was also an activity recommended by the coursebook.

As a post activity, groups of four created a poster mentioning medicines they recommended, what they were for, as well as how and when to use them. Students then presented the posters to the whole class.

Conclusion

This experience has shown how a bachelor's thesis can serve as a tool to study situated knowledge, a topic that is usually reserved for the theoretical clarity demanded of postgraduate theses.

The issue of evaluation pressed itself forward, apparently by circumstance, but in fact the concern about the means to evaluate learning obliged attention to the issue of what it is that is learned where culture is concerned. The students learned how to express themselves with the new words and/or structures. Moreover, it belonged to them. They expressed how it had a purpose for them and that they have the power to use the new language.

In this piece of classroom research, the preceding discursive features became the indices with which the thesis judged whether the students had learned this lexical field, one in which the students who made posters based on their home remedies were providing content derivative of their own cultures.

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